Networks and Marketing in Small Professional Service Businesses

Introduction

The problem with which this paper wrestles is how small (micro - sole trader) professional service businesses in Yorkshire use their networks to enhance their marketing practices. Understanding how networks influence marketing practices is especially important given that professional service businesses rarely implement marketing strategies (Sweeney et al., 2011; Amonini et al., 2010).

The paper provides insight that supports a better understanding of the theory and practice of small professional service businesses, how they relate to their network, and the contribution that these have on marketing activities. It seeks to better understand networks, explores what they look like, how people relate in them and the extent of their contribution to marketing of professional service businesses. The main focus is on small professional service businesses owner/managers and their network, which in the context of this paper refers to the people they interact and connect with in relation to their marketing decisions and activities. Networks and marketing in a small professional service businesses context is dynamic and poses unique as well as varied challenges. The relationship between the two concepts may not always, or usually, be direct. This paper blends insights from a number of diffuse areas and in doing so moves the research agenda forward with regards to theory. In the context of small professional service businesses the two concepts are shown to have a complex, symbiotic and on

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occasion indirect relationship. This paper adds value and aids understanding by addressing the question of "how".

The paper begins with a review of literature that focuses on the professional services environment, networks including their structural components, as well as their formality, density, and the level of trust and commitment within them. A thorough going review of relevant literature provides for a broader theorisation of networks, marketing and professional service businesses. The integration of literature from two subject areas aids theory development. The issue of co-operation and the link between networks and marketing are also discussed before the research methodology is documents and the findings and analysis are reported. Four models/figures are presented and serve as a useful means of achieving fresh insight and knowledge of how networking and marketing work in practice.

Literature Review

Professional and Business Services

As an increasingly growing sub-sector of professional services (MarketLine, 2012), management consultancy services specialise in providing advice, guidance and operational assistance to businesses across all industries (ONS, 2007) and in contrast with other professional services such as the legal profession, they do not require accreditation. Small management consultancy businesses operate in a particularly highly competitive environment where innovation is key to differentiate from competitors, which make them consider all issues to ensure that their innovation are successful (O'Mahoney, 2011). These findings therefore reinforce that business services do innovate given that they are often considered passive with regard to innovation (Gallouj and Djellal, 2010). In fact, Coombs and Miles (2000) argue that

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they are highly innovative particularly with regard to information technologies (Coombs and Miles, 2000). One main characteristic of small management consultancy businesses is their little use of formal innovation processes (O'Mahoney, 2011) likely due to the fact that innovation is not often visible for it is embedded in their daily activity (Forsman, 2011). Besides, small firms management consultancy businesses can lack resources, such as finance or management experience (Kirby and Jones-Evans, 1997) to design and implement more formal strategic processes (Feldman Barr and McNeilly, 2003).

The literature highlights further characteristics of professional services that are applicable to small management consultancy businesses. For instance, the relevance of client relationships to innovation. Although, studies have found that customer involvement in innovation is highly financially demanding, as it is often difficult to gauge the viability of more intangible services (Syson and Perks, 2004) it has also been recognised as innovation capability (Mansury and Love, 2008; Viet Ngo and O'Cass, 2013) and used as a way to identify the different types of innovation that professional services undertake (Smedlund, 2008). Knowledge is also considered an intrinsic feature of small professional services for they operate in a context of knowledge-intensive services (Hogan et al., 2011). Access to knowledge from external sources in the form of research (survey/journal) is found to be the most enabling factor of innovation in small management consultancy businesses (O'Mahoney, 2011). Therefore, external relationships and networks are key in providing small firms with additional resources and are considered highly relevant to innovative businesses (DePropris, 2002). They allow small management consultancy businesses to exchange ideas and information with clients and other third parties (O'Mahoney, 2011). This reinforces Gómez Arias' (1995) argument that networks should be considered as an asset and used for organisational needs. In fact, in one of the very few studies on networks and innovation in professional services Syson and Perks (2004) find that through the use of their network a large financial services business enhanced their new service development by coordinating approaches with competitors and better communicating with suppliers among others.

Professional Services Environment

The literature offers a wide range of definitions with regard to professional service businesses. Some emphasise the need for official certifications and accreditations (Office of Fair Trading; nd). Others are more flexible and define them as 'a highly educated workforce and whose outputs are intangible services encoded with complex knowledge' (Greenwood et al., 2005, p. 661). Nonetheless, it is established that professional service businesses main characteristics are the use of informal strategies (Groen et al., 2012) and reliance on training and experiences, which provide them with implicit knowledge to deliver their services (Morris and Empson, 1998).

Studies in professional service businesses show that relational marketing practices are used 'frequently...and competently' (Sweeney et al., 2011, p. 293) with positive effects on performance. Networks, interaction and ongoing relationship are very much part of competing strategies, and developing and maintaining long-term relationships are important differentiating factors (Amonini et al., 2010). Feldman Barr and McNeilly's (2003) study on marketing practices in small accounting businesses finds that the lack of resources does not allow for the design and implementation of detailed marketing plans and that marketing is more tactical.

Networks

Small businesses do not always see establishing business contacts as networking (Curran et al., 1991). Research on networks has focused on entrepreneurship, where networking is an inherent activity (Dubini, and Aldrich, 1991; Shaw, 2013). There is a need to generate theory and insight in this field. To better understand networks and their

influence on small professional service businesses both their structural and relational components should be acknowledged (Granovetter, 1973; Olkkonen et al., 2000; Hoang, and Antoncic, 2003). Furthermore, there is a need to move away from the traditional approach of considering networks purely on a structural basis and to acknowledge them as dynamic systems (Kilduff and Tsai, 2012). This allows them to be understood as 'organized pattern of activities' not just as an 'organized web' (Hakansson, and Snehota 1995, p. 40).

Structural component of networks

Networks can be structurally centralised and decentralised (Robins et al, 2011). While centralised networks follow more rigid and established rules, which give shape to a formal structure, decentralised networks in contrast are more informally structured. Davern (1997) in a social related context considers both physical and relational elements as structural. In contrast, Carson et al. (2004) in a business environment distinguishes structure from relationship in a framework that also brings a 'usage' dimension, focusing on the potential link between network and marketing.

Formality

Social or informal networks consist of personal relationships while business or formal networks imply frequent economic interactions (Vasilchenko, and Morrish, 2011; Johannisson, 1986; Gilmore et al., 2006). However, in small businesses the line between both is often blurred (Wilkins, 1997). Small businesses interact most predominantly with other business (Rocks et al., 2005) and less with family and social

contacts (Borch, and Huse, 1993; Tonge, 2010). Nonetheless, informal networks can be significant to them (Perrow, 1986; Johannisson, 1996; Borch, and Huse, 1993; MacGregor, 2004; Tonge, 2010). Friends and family can provide essential networking opportunities and have a role in acquiring and retaining clients (Copp, and Ivy, 2001; Ozcan, 1995).

Density

Density described as the level of interconnections between network members (Tichy, and Fombrun, 1979; Aldrich, and Zimmer, 1986) can be explored through the concept of weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). Low-density networks are made of weak ties where sources are less likely to know each other while in high-density networks where ties are strong most sources will be closely connected. Occasionally, the type of business can affect the level of density (Rocks et al., 2005). For instance, a high number of similar and competitive businesses in a network will tend to produce lower level of interconnection. Swaminathan and Moorman's (2009) highlight the link between structural and relational network components as they believe that for businesses delivering less tangible products, such as those provided by professional services small businesses, density is less significant since trust is the most important element regarding relationships.

Trust and commitment

Trust is 'a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence' (Moorman et al., 1993, p. 82), and is based on reciprocity (Silversides,

2001). It is strongly related to relationships given that networks where personal interactions are higher show higher levels of trust (Besser, and Miller, 2011). Time (Silversides, 2001), personal disposition and similarity between sources help establish trust and the move from transactional and opportunistic relationships to deeper relational ones (Gössling, 2004). These deeper relationships enhance commitment to the network as benefits become more apparent (Andrésen et al., 2012).

Interestingly, there is a link between commitment and diversity since networks made mostly of competitors might have a different purpose and have a different level of commitment than more diverse and complementary networks (Andrésen et al., 2012). Commitment is also higher when networks concentrate on business related activities rather than non-business related ones, where there is the potential of business benefits (Andrésen et al., 2012).

Co-operation

Cooperation is closely linked to trust and commitment. Poor commitment (Roxenhall, 2011) and lack of trust have a negative impact on cooperation and therefore safeguarding trust between members is a main concern of cooperation (Williams, 2005).

In strategic networks high level of density provides more openings for cooperation, while high level of diversity enhances chances of connection with alternative contacts, which can result in more informal cooperation (Williams, 2005). Koza and Lewin's (1999) study on motivations in strategic network alliances in professional services finds conflicting competitive tensions between members. They

argue that this is likely to be a common characteristic of such networks and that ties are stronger and less opportunistic in emergent networks as they are built on a genuine need to collaborate and have stronger informal connections.

Link between networks and marketing

The literature on the link between networks and the marketing of small businesses acknowledges the positive influence of networks in entrepreneurship where it is seen as an essential tool for marketing decisions (Gilmore, and Carson, 1999; Shaw, 2013). Gilmore et al.'s (2006) evaluation of networking contribution to marketing in a SME distribution channel, shows a relationship between the extent of marketing activities undertaken and the level of networking, together with a link to the structural and relational components. They find that higher level of proactive networking leads to more advanced marketing practices while stronger ties have more influence on marketing decisions. However, understandably their evaluation relies mostly on activities related to the marketing mix, which confirms 'promotional activities' and 'product decision' as the activities most influenced by the network.

Networking benefits small businesses by helping them access resources that they would otherwise not be able to. It allows people to get better known and promote themselves, organizing joint events, providing support for specific projects and for being kept informed about industry news (Wilkins, 1997). The link between network and marketing can be interpreted as the use of network to influence and support marketing decisions (Gilmore, and Carson, 1999; Gilmore et al., 2006). Gilmore and Carson (1999) show that networks support marketing decisions and that for small

entrepreneurial businesses 'networking is a way of doing business' (p. 31).

Research Methodology

This exploratory study used qualitative research as it allows a more emergent and flexible design (Merriam, 2009). It is also an appropriate approach when researching networking activities of SMEs (Gilmore et al., 2006) as it allows for an understanding of actions instead of simply measuring them (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988) to generate theory (Carson et al., 2001).

The sample population was small professional service businesses operating in Yorkshire, UK. Five small businesses took part and this was seen as an appropriate number within the recommended range of four to ten (Yin, 1994). The focus of qualitative research on respondents' experiences and opinions favours methods such as interviews (Merriam, 2009). The study gathered primary data through an interview process to gain deeper understanding of reasons and motivations behind the respondents' actions in relation to their networking activities (Bryman, and Bell, 2011). Five semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each business had the characteristic of being sole trader and they comprised a 1] facilitator in the voluntary and public sector; 2] management consultant in the private sector; 3] digital coach in all sectors; 4] community activist in the voluntary/community and public sector; and 5] organisational development and communications consultant in all sectors.

1) Facilitator in the voluntary and public sector

The first small business case comprised two independent freelance facilitators, and has been in operation since 1994 offering facilitation services, consultancy, organisational development

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and one to one coaching across the third sector, public sector and social innovation sector. Their services are based on principles of participation, an underpinning value of the business, and include a range of participative processes and facilitation techniques. The business is based in Leeds and works nationally and internationally. The consultants also design and deliver training in participatory methodologies and leadership.

2) Management consultant in the commercial sector

The second case is a consultancy business based in Harrogate that delivers services mostly in the commercial sector. The business provides services to small and large businesses that address strategic issues (i.e. restructuring, team development), stakeholder support and organisational learning. The consultant who has a background in sales, marketing, systems designs and project management and also provides coaching services to individual and organisations. He has recently relocated from Canada to the UK.

3) Digital coach in all sectors

The third consultancy business offers marketing services to organisations across all sectors, with a particular focus on online promotion. With a marketing background and strong interest in IT the consultant supports organisations seeking to develop their online presence and marketing campaign. He designs projects that identify their needs (i.e.: social media, search optimisation) and support clients in putting them into action. The consultant/entrepreneur is also in the process of developing a new business in a niche market that provides a particular management software to the game industry.

4) Community activist in the voluntary/community and public sector

The fourth business was a sole trader based in Leeds who provides consultancy services in the public sector and community and faith groups. The main focus of his services is on the

development of community organisation and support to faith organisations in providing responses to community inequalities in the city. The consultant also teaches on training programmes and various conferences around the UK and is a PhD student in London.

5) Organisational development and communications consultant in all sectors

The fifth case is a Phd qualified consultant based in Leeds who provides services across all sectors. With a background in developing communication programmes in large telecommunication companies the organisation provides services aimed at better addressing issues deriving from organisational complexity (disconnects, loss of productivity) to enhance business efficiency and effectiveness. The consultant also designs and delivers training and performance management programmes.

Semi-structured interviews using an interview guide approach (Patton, 1987), enabled participants to talk openly and flexibly about their experience while ensuring that specific questions about network elements were answered. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Participants were assured that information or quotes would not identify any of them and interviews were conducted at the respondents' workplace at a time of their choosing.

Interviews were divided in to three parts. The first part focused on better understanding the context in which participants operated. Questions such as 'can you tell me a bit more about your work?' were asked. The second part of the interview focused on exploring participants' network. With regard to the structural components of networks participants were asked for instance 'who would you say are your main group of contacts in your network?' The relational elements of networks was explored

asking questions such as 'can you tell me about the type of information you share within your network?'. The final part of the interview focused on the link between participants' network and their business activities.

The term network was explained as the people they talked to in relation to their business activities. The term 'business' was deliberately used instead of 'marketing' to avoid respondents providing more predictable responses (Carson et al., 2004) and also to allow consideration of a wider scope of activities that might not have been perceived as marketing.

The data analysed in the study identifies key characteristic of small business services in relation to marketing, detailing the structure of each businesses' networks, the strength of their relational links in them and the extent of which network influenced their marketing activities.

There are some limitations to the design of the research. The interview sample size is small and there are limitations as to how far one can generalise from such a specific and small study. Networking and marketing are not single easily identified activities and as such they are complex and contested concepts. What exactly constitutes their key dimensions is subject to widely divergent views and much debate. Although there are limitations it is important not to lose sight of the paper's strengths, namely its focus on real world small (micro) business practice.

Findings

The findings section presents the themes identified during the research, which provides

insight on the structure of small professional services firms' network, how people relate in them and the extent of how these contribute to their marketing activities.

Networks

Small Professional Service businesses' networks are highly emergent with a loose structure. *Participant B*: 'I think I'd be fooling myself to believe I had much control over this at all and how it develops.'

Participants when asked to map and describe their network identified some core categories. These categories ranged from geographic, ideas, common interests to connecting time and work generation groups amongst others. The overall frame is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Figure 1 shows that networks have very distinctive features with broad and multiple operating dynamics. It also indicates that most businesses define their network through a relational construct rather than structural. For instance, the use of concept like 'geographical', 'time', 'ideas' and 'space' all still imply connections between sources. The sole reference to structural construct arises from the notion of 'friends and family', which relates to the formality element of networks.

Structural dimension

Size: The size of networks ranged from 50 to 250 contacts. All were built around a core group of between 25 to 50 people. Larger networks provided more opportunities

to develop ideas although these also led to information overload and a lack of capacity to fully 'exploit' all the opportunities. Smaller networks allowed deeper conversation and easier recommendation, although were seen as more likely to lack diversity and provide minimum work generation. While size was seen as important to generate work, provide for a sense of self-importance the quality of contact was also acknowledged as highly relevant. *Participant A:* 'What matters to me is usefulness and intimacy…. I'm not looking for size I'm looking for depth more than anything else.'

All networks had experienced recent growth. This was due to participants being more proactive and engaged with their sector as well as increasingly businesses remaining in contact after completed projects. Undertaking more interconnected and larger projects also meant enhanced connections.

Formality: Most networks had higher level of formal/business related connections. Yet, the line between both formal and informal connections was blurred as one was often acknowledged as the other and vice versa. *Participant A:* 'These people are also my friends actually but they are not friends that live in the same town as me that I go out for dinner with, I mean I might do but we'll probably talk about work.' *Participant D:* 'I probably try to make all my informal relationships formal and all my formal ones informal….'

Formal connections provided resources to help develop ideas and initiatives but also to understand work related issues. Therefore, they offered both practical and moral support. There was a level of informal sources in networks although this was linked to particular circumstances like participants being new to the business, moving away from

it or having recently arrived to the area. The support provided by informal sources was mostly moral and financial.

Diversity: There was a distinction between social friends and friends of work related interactions. *Participant D:* 'I tend to see everybody as a potential collaborator.'

Networks were largely based on sources with similar worldviews and purposes. This indicates that while diversity was low in terms of variety of sources it was high in information and opinion exchanges, which contributed to more opportunities, learning and higher creativity.

Density: Findings show a combination of higher and lower level of connection between network sources. Sources were more highly connected in the networks' core groups and less connected around them. Connections were highly dependent on having common interest and values. Higher levels of connections were particularly due to contacts having joint work experiences and autonomy. Higher density provided stronger support and communication, and higher level of reciprocity. Information within the network could travel faster which delivered a number of benefits. *Participant A:* '…it's reciprocal being able to ask for help and give help, ….exchange things quite quickly and information travels around the system very quickly.'

However, it also meant that networks could be inward looking with the risk of negative comments travelling faster. A summary of the findings on the structural elements of participants' networks' are illustrated in figure 2:

Insert Figure 2 Here

The illustration of each structural network components in figure 2 emphasises the significance of the 'core group' particularly in relation to network size and density, as well as their high level of formality and low level of diversity. The relation between the components is also clearly illustrated since for instance the benefits and advantages they provide such as resources and support rely largely on trust and shared values, which vary from the relationship length and shared experiences.

Relational dimension

Networking: All participants were proactive in networking, although half of them had difficulty relating to the terminology, which they felt referred to a traditional and superficial constructed concept. *Participant C:* 'The word networking has and is always making my toes curl. I've been to networking events and just found them to be such alien places to me.' *Participant E*: 'I meet this person once a month, is that networking? It's more exploring ideas… and a language, which we can use.'

Motivations for networking were based on the idea of shorter and longer-term outcomes. Networking was used more intentionally to generate short-term work opportunities although not strategically and also build longer-term relationships with people of similar interest with the aim to inquire, exchange and enhance collaborative working. *Participant A*: 'Connection….I think the work comes nearly as a by-product…my other motivation is…. collaboration.' *Participant B:* 'One is to develop a like minded community, just develop some new friendships and support around in

Yorkshire. Two is obviously to get work.' Findings also show strong business linkages in all networks, through high level of trust, commitment and cooperation.

Trust: There was high level of trust within all participants' networks in that large amount of core information was exchanged between sources. Information referred to past work experiences, charging rates, operating models and sharing contacts amongst others. However participants did not see this as confidential and information was easily exchanged throughout the networks. Exchanges of personal or third party related information, although still within a business context, was seen as more confidential and relied on implicit trust. This information was exchanged in smaller groups of 3 to 8 people all of whom were part of the networks' core groups. These smaller groups were seen as safe and unconditional places that could cope with the emotional side as well as the practical. Trust was built through regular contact and reciprocity and did not require physical proximity and need for all participants to be similar. Thus, time played a part in trust building, although participants required as much as anything the need to see and demonstrate honesty and vulnerability to build trust. The level of trust within the network is illustrated in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 Here

Figure 3 illustrates that the higher the level of trust in networks the higher the exchange of personal and emotional related information. Higher level of trust is evident at the core centre of the network between a smaller number of sources as is the level of confidential exchanges becoming gradually lower within the rest of the network.

Commitment: There was a high level of commitment particularly to the network core groups due to awareness of the efforts required to build and maintain networks. Connections happened on a daily, weekly and monthly basis although these varied whether sources were working on joint projects or not. In addition to face-to-face interactions connections were also maintained through phone, email, text and Skype. *Participant A:* 'Physical proximity does not seem to matter….we use a lot of Internet connection ….' *Participant D*: 'I don't spend long on the phone but the fact that you can get a text to someone…. and they can read it at their leisure so yeah, I'm constantly in contact with people'. Personality traits were important in commitment in that people needed to relate to others and belong to a wider community.

Cooperation: Level of cooperation and culture of collaboration was high in all networks as this was seen as a general and natural way of operating and a way to complement skills. *Participant C:* 'About half of the work…. people can extend their range of services to clients we can each offer things others can't do'.

There was a low level of joint promotional activities. Cooperation was demonstrated in the form of research and investigation openly undertaken in work related topics. However, it was mostly related to members working jointly on a short-term basis to deliver services to clients. These activities tended to be mostly carried out with sources from the core group. Joint working approaches enabled a higher level of reciprocity. There was no reported experience of opportunistic behaviours and the terminology was mostly understood as openings and possibilities. *Participant C:* 'if somebody had some work I'd perk up my ears a bit more…. as long as it's within the context of maintaining relationships for the long term.' Cooperation had also led to

some participants establishing new business ventures. One of them for instance was jointly developing a product with one of his network sources. Another participant was considering establishing a joint organisation with several sources to deliver their services.

Networks and Marketing

Participants did not intentionally use their network for marketing purposes in a consistent way and had a largely negative perception of the concept. However, findings showed evidence of networks being influential on marketing activities mostly in relation to services and promotion. Networks were highly influential on participants' personal development from learning and motivations through shared exchanges which fed back directly as knowledge into services and delivery processes. The collaborative nature of networks was also largely reflected through ensuring that services were delivered matching requests in more complex environments. Communication also enabled participants to see what was being done in the sector, which helped raise the quality and standard of their services. *Participant B:* 'Having communities and I think this is the way forward for the way we can work and it's those communities of support that are key.' *Participant D:* '…relationships to enable things to happen…new info as well…. they make me aware of other people that are doing similar things….'

With regard to promotion, networks had a strong influence on work generation largely through recommendation. While these were not directly considered as promotional tools they still provided participants with a focus to foster their reputation.

Participant E: 'If I was doing something I wanted to raise awareness of I would do that through the people I know and somebody might be interested in this...'

Sources with most influence on participants' business activities and decisions were from their networks' core groups and were considered as having higher knowledge and/or providing stronger emotional support. Clients outside the networks were also found to have some influence.

Participants did not consider their network as a business or marketing asset to help their activities but instead saw it as an entrenched part of themselves, their business and life. *Participant B*: 'I don't see I have a network it's so alien to me. It doesn't feel like me, I'm going through life I have all sorts of relationships with people and I don't define it as a thing.' *Participant A:* 'I think it is my business, I think it's really part and parcel of it and very tied up in it.'

A summary of the findings on the influence of networks on small professional service businesses is illustrated in figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 Here

Figure 4 shows that communication exchanges most often occur in the form of learning, motivation and collaboration, and do have an influence on businesses. As well as helping improve their services these also enable self-promotion by enhancing businesses' reputation and recommendation.

Discussion

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Small Professional Service Businesses

Participants' lack of language to express their work suggests a possible disconnection from mainstream business and marketing terminology, which implies the need for a terminology that better represents the values within the sector.

Findings show an absence of business and marketing strategies. However, there is evidence that marketing activities, for example communication, are being conducted. This is consistent with previous studies (Sweeney et al., 2011) although without being acknowledged or considered as such. Participants' general disapproval of marketing concepts supports the negative perception of professional services businesses on marketing (Kotler, and Connor, 1977). Participants' awareness and proactive attitude in sustaining their business supports Feldman Barr and McNeilly's (2003) findings on small professional services businesses using tactical marketing. Evidence of the highly relational nature of these approaches, which highlights the relational nature of small professional services and principles on which they operate also suggests that their marketing is adapted to the way they conduct their business (Simpson et al., 2006). These findings therefore disagree with the argument that small businesses do not develop and implement marketing plans due to lack of resources (Feldman Barr, and McNeilly, 2003).

Structure of networks

This research highlights the relevance of the relational dimension of networks by acknowledging that small professional services businesses consider their network from a connection perspective, which is reflected by actors interacting at different times, across different geographical areas or according to different interests and

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beliefs among others. This finding reinforces Kilduff and Tsai's (2012) call to further move away from a traditional exploration that only considers structural network components, which does not allow presenting a picture of networks as dynamic.

Swaminathan, and Moorman (2009) highlighted the importance of a balanced level of density in constructed networks to manage relationships and decisions. Interestingly, results show a combination of high and low density though with a distinct higher level in networks' core groups and lower level outside these. This finding is relevant for two reasons as it confirms the relationship between density and size of core groups since bigger core groups lead to higher levels of network density and smaller core groups to lower network density. It also shows the relevance and influence of trust on the interconnection of the structural elements, in this case size and density. This can be contrasted with Swaminathan and Moorman's (2009) argument that trust is more important than density to businesses delivering intangible products. This is evidenced by the fact that trust is not a separate concept to density but one of its underlying elements as interconnections in the core groups had established trust between each other through shared work experiences and a willingness to connect.

Strength of linkages

Results show higher confidential information exchanges in networks' core groups and even higher between smaller groups within core groups (figure 3), which highlights the link between network size and trust and suggests that in this context networks have several levels of trust. Findings show that these smaller groups exchanged personal related information relying on implicit trust, which was considered

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more confidential than business related information exchanged in the rest of the core groups. This supports the case that higher levels of personal interaction enhance trust levels (Besser, and Miller, 2011). In agreement with Silversides' (2001) notion that regular contacts and reciprocity build trust there was evidence of trust having been built over time and through daily and monthly regular interactions. Participants did not see work related information as highly confidential and competitors were perceived as potential collaborators.

Findings show higher level of commitment in networks where contacts are regular, particularly in core groups. Findings also reinforce the potential relation between diversity (structural) and commitment (relational) highlighted by Andrésen et al. (2012) where less diverse networks, made of similar sources have different purposes and levels of commitment than more diverse ones. Here, the high level of similar ideas and values which were identified when exploring diversity can be suggested as contributing to network commitment.

Commitment to networking and networks was evident and does not support Curran et al.'s (1991) argument that small businesses do not network. Findings indicate high level of cooperation and reciprocity and therefore support Williams' (2005) claim that higher level of density provide more opportunities to cooperate. The highest level of cooperation was found in the network's core groups, where density is higher.

Cooperation mostly relates to jointly delivering short-term services and is motivated by the need to complement skills. This suggests the absence of a strategic focus. Koza and Lewin (1999) argued that there was a genuine need for collaboration

in emergent networks as opposed to strategic ones which lead to stronger ties and less opportunism.

Link between Networks and Marketing

Regarding the link between small professional service businesses' networks and their marketing, findings indicate that networks in this context did have an influence on business and marketing related activities, which supports previous findings in entrepreneurships and SMEs contexts (Gilmore, and Carson, 1999; Gilmore et al., 2006). Results are consistent with previous studies' (Mattson, 1997; Silversides, 2001) which argued that the relational aspect of businesses services means that marketing should be considered in terms of reputation, learning and knowledge exchanges amongst other things. There was evidence that learning gained through networking particularly within the core groups fed back into services and delivery processes. There was also evidence of reputation being linked to promotion since networks offered possibilities to enhance reputation by fostering credibility that led to recommendation. Findings also support Gilmore and Carson's (1999) argument that networks are a way of doing business for small entrepreneurs as participants identified their networks as being inherently part of their work, life and themselves.

Conclusion

The models presented in this paper serve as useful tools for achieving insight and knowledge of how marketing and small (micro) business networks operate in practice. The literature has shown that both the concepts of networks and marketing

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are contested and that there are widely divergent views about what constitutes their key dimensions. Small professional service businesses are embedded in a network of social relations that involve the community, businesses and the organs of the state. Marketing is a key element in managing, nurturing and growing successful network relations. The paper has made use of multiple theoretical perspectives, which added value, helped analysis and gave credibility to the findings.

Fresh insight to small professional services' networks and their contribution to marketing activities have shown an increasing trend of small businesses relying on collaborative working practices to deliver larger and more complex services.
Small businesses are still reactive concerning their marketing activities; however they also use tactical marketing approaches, which suit them. Networks have a two-level structure each with their own structural characteristics and external factors have an influence on the structural components. Furthermore, structure is not strategically constructed and motivated as exchanges focus on quality not quantity and are not intentionally sought to enhance network efficiency. In addition to supporting the interconnection between structural elements findings corroborate the connection between structural and relational components with the suggestion that in service related businesses the notion of trust is not distinct to density but an underlying component.

Generally linkages are strong as there is high level of trust, commitment and cooperation. There is no suggestion of the economic climate having an impact on relational elements apart from collaboration, which is indirectly influenced by changes in services and consequent increase of joint services delivery. Businesses have shorter and longer-term motivations, which underpin their commitment. Short-term

motivations focus on work generation and longer term motivations on developing longer collaborative relationships. Therefore, collaborative relationships and practices help shape the structure of networks and the strength of connections in them. Besides, by examining the structure and strength of networks' relationships insight on understanding motivations for collaboration can also be provided. For practitioners looking at exploiting or developing the influence of networks on small businesses differentiating both will help develop measures that are adapted to both rationales.

Generally businesses do not intentionally and knowingly use their network for marketing purposes. However, networks have a direct influence on marketing that is particular to their relational characteristics of service businesses, in this case in the form of learning, knowledge exchange and reputation. These activities positively feed through their services and processes, and promotion. Networks are integral to small professional services.

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Figure 1

Networks construct

			Networks				

Geographical	Time	Friends & Family	Ideas	Common Interestst /Beliefs	Work Generation	Space	Groups
Global - National - Local	Yearly - Monthly - Weekly - Daily		Learning Commun-ities	Learning Communities		Co-working space	Core groups
							Peripheral groups
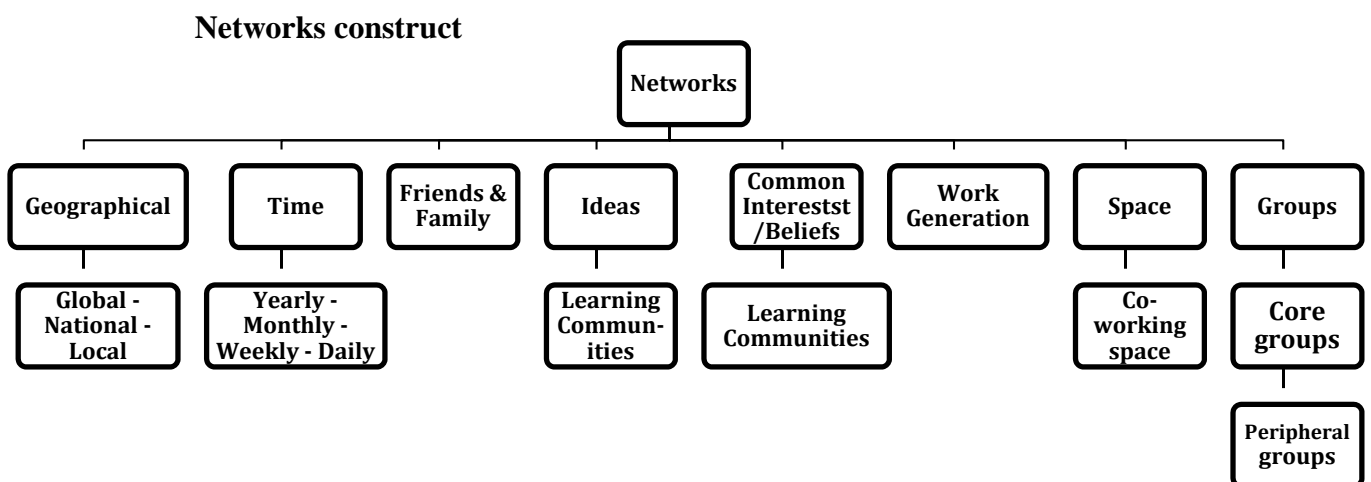
Source: Author

Figure 2

Structural elements of small professional business services' networks

Size

Network

Core Group

Opportunities - Information exchange

Trust - Support

Formality

Formal

Informal

Resources
Support (emotional / practical)

Diversity

Fellow workers

Friends   Family

Shared values
Shared purpose / Common Interest
Mutual respect

Density

Core Group

Network

Long term relationships
Intentional
Shared experiences

Commitment
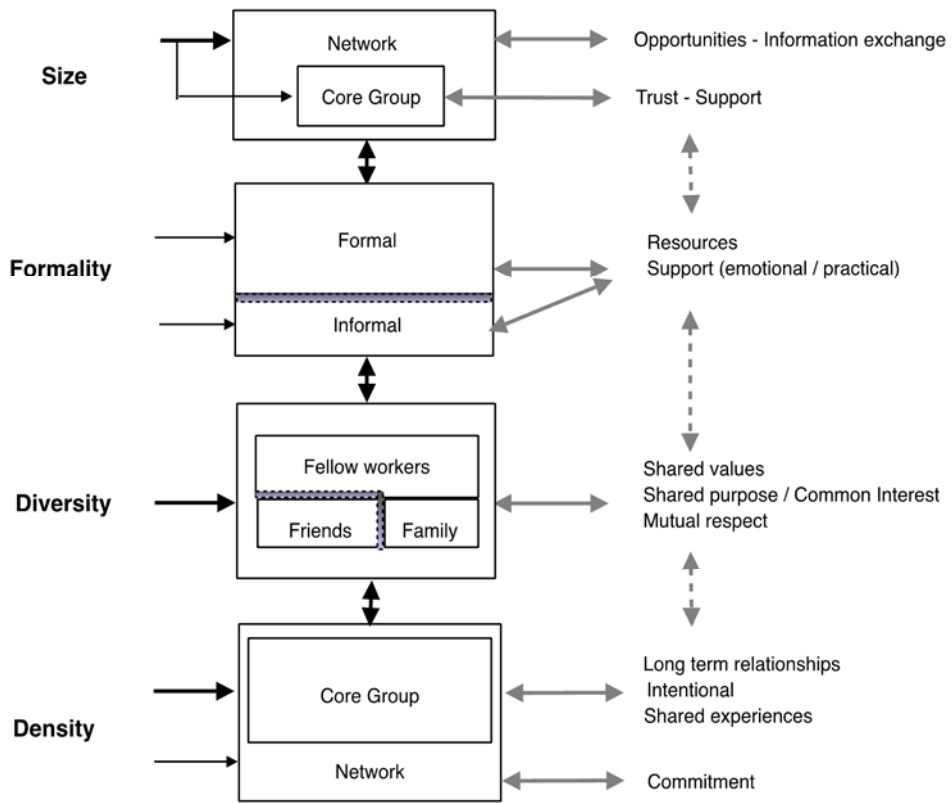
Source: Author

Figure 3

Level of trust in small professional service businesses' network

Network - 50 to 250 people

Lowest confidential
exchanges

Core group - 25 to 50 people

High level of confidential
exchanges

Small group - 3 to 8 people

Highest level of confidential
exchanges

Higher level of trust   Lower level of trust
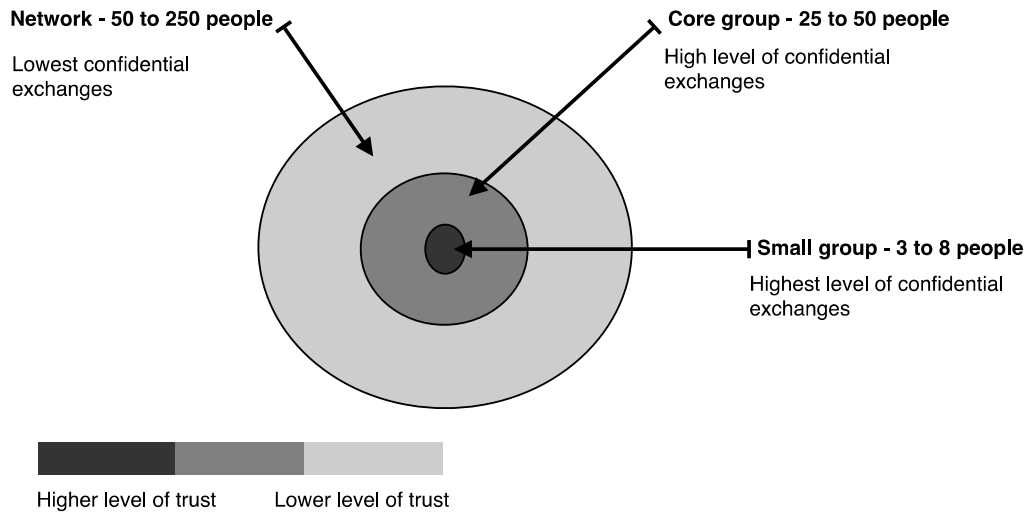
Source: Author

Figure 4

Influence of networks on

small professional business services' marketing

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              N   e   t   w   o   r   k           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

                    Influences

                                    Tacit knowledge

              ┌──────────────────┐
              │     Learning     │
              │    Motivation    │
              │   Collaboration  │
              └──────────────────┘

              ┌──────────────────┐
              │    Marketing     │
              │       Mix        │
              └──────────────────┘

     ┌──────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────┐
     │     Services     │    │    Promotion     │
     │   & Processes    │    │                  │
     └──────────────────┘    └──────────────────┘

     Enhanced services.          Reputation
     Joint service delivery    Recommendation
     matching changing
          demand
```

Communication / Exchanges

Source: Author